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Memory of War and the Resurgence of Separatist Movements in the South East Nigeria

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Abstract

The import of this article is how the memory of the Biafra Civil War in Nigeria (1967-1970) has sustained the tempo of separatist movements in the South East Nigeria especially in the modern times. Different separatist movements have emerged from the South East since Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999. The article adopted a descriptive research for exploring the problem from extant literatures. Using frustration aggression theory as the theoretical orientation, the article submits that separatist movements in South East Nigeria are sustained because of the remembrance of the events of the civil war and perceived marginalization of the Igbos in the socio-economic and political equation of the post civil war Nigeria.

Keyword: Memory, war, separatist, self-determination, ethnicity

Introduction

Hunt's (2010) comment on memory, war and trauma showed that the remembrance of war and the trauma of the violent by family members especially those who lost their loved ones to such conflicts or witnessed the atrocities committed during the process play much roles in the peace-building process. This memory, to a larger extent, determines socio-political relations and development in such societies after the conflict had subsided (McGrattan and Hopkins, 2016). Similarly, war memory, in most cases, serves as a means of identity formation- the victor and the vanquished. Memory of war shapes present and future relations between previous conflicting groups in terms of who gets what, when, how and how much in such societies. This segregation in terms of victor-vanquished relationship has continued to fuel agitations especially in plural societies where the minority groups who are usually victims of the majority bargains for a better deal.

Minority struggle for relevance is a phenomenon which has become a major source of stress globally wherever they existed. Scholars have argued that minority question sometimes lead to agitations which affect almost all the heterogeneous societies world over (Cawte, 1968, Barth,

1969). Similarly, Ogundiya (2010) submitted that developed nations are also entrapped in the issues of majority/minority question and these, in many ways, have shaped the internal political dynamics of these nations.

The crisis between Nigeria's federal centre and its constituent parts has persisted since the colonial era. This crisis often resulted into full blown war thereby calling into question the philosophical and practical basis of the Nigerian federal structure. It is noteworthy that crisis had always brewed between minority and majority ethnic groups, a reality that questions the philosophical basis of minority status in the Nigerian state. In Nigeria, the minority conflict often centered on resources or power balances (Benjamin, 2014). It would be recalled that the Igbos in 1967 launched a secessionist offensive against the Nigerian state over perceived exclusion and marginalization of the Igbos in the Nigerian project (Duruji, 2009). Prior the Biafra war of 1967, the Igbos were generally political and economic power brokers in Nigeria and particularly in the south east region (which then comprised the present day south-south). However, after the war, the power equations suddenly turned against the Igbos while it favoured other ethnic groups who were perceived "victorious" in the war

notwithstanding the federal government philosophy of “No Victor; No Vanquish.” So the Igbos lost their erstwhile political and bureaucratic access and hegemony in the Nigerian state. It is against this background that Duruji, (2009) posited that the end of the war was followed by a deliberate social, political and economic policies aimed at reducing the capacity of the Igbos to challenge the state or the dominance of the victorious groups any time in the future.

If the 1967 war had ended on a “No Victor No Vanquish” basis, the Igbos were supposed to continue to enjoy their erstwhile dominance status and other socio-economic and political privileges with the other two main language groups at independence. Therefore, the sudden shift of the south east from one of the dominant ethnic groups to minority status became a structural contradiction in that required critical inquiry because it portended danger to national security. It is against this background that this article explores how the remembrance of the events of the Biafra war has continued to fuel a continuous agitation for self determination in the South East Nigeria.

Theoretical Perspective

This article adopted the Frustration-Aggression theory. Most psychologists often trace individual aggression to some form of frustration. John Dollard et al (1939) at Yale University began with the assumption that “aggression is always a consequence of frustration” and that frustration always leads to some form of aggression. They posit that frustration is an interference with the occurrence of an instigated goal response at its proper time.

In an attempt to explain aggression scholars point to the difference between what people feel they want or deserve to what they actually get. Where expectation did not meet attainment, the tendency is for people to confront those they hold responsible for frustrating their ambition. This is the central position of Ted Robert Gurr in his relative deprivation thesis: “the greater the discrepancy, however marginal, between what is sought and what seems attainable, the greater will be the chances that anger and violence will result” (Gurr, 1970:24).

Central to the explanation of frustration aggression theory is that in a situation where the legitimate desires of an individual or group is denied either directly or by the indirect way the society is structured, the feeling of disappointment may lead the

individual or group concerned to expressing anger through violence directed at those responsible or the people who are directly or indirectly related to them.

This theory is quite apt for this article entitled “Memory of War and the Resurgence of Separatist Movement in the South East Nigeria.” One can hypothesize that there is a direct correlation between the resurgence of the separatist groups in the South East Nigeria due to perceived marginalization in the Nigerian state. Nigeria, for instance, is a federation of thirty-six states, 774 Local Government Areas spread across six geo-political zones. All other zones have six and seven states respectively but only South East has five states; of the 774 local government areas in Nigeria, the five states in the South East put together have just 95 local government areas while just a state in some other regions or geo-political zones have 44 local government areas. This has far reaching implication on policy formulation; lobbying in the parliament; number of representatives; resource allocation; appointments at the federal level; distribution of infrastructure, among others, in the federation. Several peaceful means have been adopted to redress the perceived injustice but has not yielded the expected

result. Prior the Nigerian Civil war of 1967, there were four regions in Nigeria. The Igbo speaking area of South East was a major region but after the civil war, the input and representation of Igbo extraction has been reduced to a minority despite the policy of “No Victor, No Vanquished” declared at the end of the war. This perceived discrepancy has become a major source of agitation by different groups under numerous aegis in South East Nigeria.

Based on the foregoing, it is obvious that though ethnicity is a social construct, it can consciously or unconsciously divide and at the same time act as a unifying factor in the society especially in a heterogeneous society. Social construct often confers a sense of oneness on a social group especially when faced with a challenge that threatened their corporate existence as a group. On the one hand, common challenge promotes group identity and solidarity. On the other hand, the remembrance of a collective challenge of deprivation suffered by a group in their quest for survival within and among other group members of the society often promotes continuous conflict of interest against those they perceived to be the source/cause of their deprivation.

Conceptual Discourse

Separatist movement

The rising rate of man's inhumanity to man has continually drawn attention to a situation where a unit of a federation agitate for greater regional autonomy or loosening political control by the centre to a total secession from the federating unit through the declaration of its own freedom or independent. This often resulted to war and loss of life. However, such a struggle is not peculiar to less developed countries or societies but play out in developed ones. Many scholars have dwelt on the areas that have witnessed separatist actions. Beary (2008), for instance, discussed separatist actions in Tibet, Kosovo, and Iraq while Tull (2011) considered separatists movements in Africa. Fearon (2004) argued that war of separatist nationalism has continued to rage around the globe since the 1990s in the Balkans, India, Russia, Sudan, Britain (Northern Ireland) etc. In fact, Sudan has completed the cycle of separatism and split into Sudan and South Sudan. Wright (1974) posited that separatism is the desire of some articulate portion of the population in a section of a sovereign separate to loosen or break political and legal bonds which tie the part with the whole. Separatism differs from secession despite the fact that both have

elements of political instability which may likely end up in the break-up of the polity. Badal (cited in Adangor, 2017) argued that the aim of any separatist movement may change depending upon a number of factors which include but not limited to: (a) leadership of the movement; (b) the level of mass support it enjoys or can muster; and (c) the occurrence of supervening events such as war or revolution which may offer the separatists opportunity either for secession or compromise with the central government for greater regional autonomy. If we adopt Badal's viewpoint of separatism, there is ample opportunity for reconciliation and compromise even without violence or bloodshed depending on the willingness of the parties involved to come to a round-table to discuss and resolve their differences. However, failure to reach a compromise by addressing the issues at stake, separatist agitation may end up in secession (the total severance of a part of a sovereign state from the whole) such that the part becomes independent of the original whole.

Many factors may trigger off separatist actions but they also vary from one society to another. However, James 2009 and Tull (2011) argued that separatism generally crops up when, at least, one of two

conditions is present these include uneven development which results to inequalities of wealth, income, and power, and/or polarization of ethno-religious differences, which are typically resolved through warfare and extreme violence. The crux of the argument is that regional separatist movements arise from popular discontent of their group's condition over other members of the same society/ polity. Similarly, Adangor (2017) pointed out, that separatism ensues when there is a sustained sense of domination and deprivation among members of a distinct homogeneous group within a polity. Where a culturally distinct group within the same federation feels that its region has suffered deprivation (no fair share of the benefits accruing to the union from the central government or has been set apart for marginalization and neglect by the state). The loyalty of the group to the union may be compromised thereby alienating its members from the union.

Memory of War and Strengthening of Separatist Ideology

In their scholarly work, "The Collective Memory Reader" Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy (2011) submitted that memory studies was first distinguished by a French Sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, who

incidentally was considered the founding father of contemporary memory studies. They argued that Halbwachs identified two kinds of memories: The first kind of memory concerns the events of one's own life that one remembers (autobiography) because they were experienced directly; and the second kind of memory refers to residues of events by virtue of which groups claim a continuous identity through time (historical). Other scholars such as Sebald, (2004) emphasized the importance of "second-hand memory" and what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory," which refers to those who actually experience an event and pass on second-hand memories to those too young to have experienced or remembered them. Usually the term "postmemory" has been used to explore the memories of members of the second or even third generation (Olick, et'al, 2011).

Political legitimacy is achieved in the evocation of the past memories by promoting certain public meanings that could be instrumental to certain political purposes. In case of post-war societies, these memories are contested between former conflicting parties but often also between various political forces within a group. In other words, war remembrance is an ongoing struggle of different political

elites in (re-)constructing certain versions of the past, by aiming its public articulation and recognition in order to gain legitimacy and power.

War remembrance often affects political distrust in the sense that it emphasizes not only substantial and symbolic gaps but also spatial divisions between formerly conflicting parties (Dahlman and Williams, 2010). In political discourse just as in everyday life, traumatic memories and experiences from war continue to play a massive role and leaves a profound mark on the younger generations that had less, or even no experiences from that period of time.

Public discourse and the narrations of the past are controlled and transmitted in different ways by individual politicians, political parties, and other influential or pressure groups. According to Baliqi (2017), this depicts war veterans who attempt to gain power, authority, and legitimacy through experiences of war events, be they in the form of true or supposed sacrifice or heroism. Thus, the official and semi-official historiography not only affects ethnic relations but political attitudes and social norms particularly among younger generations. Baliqi's argument supports extant literature on the factors

strengthening separatist ideology. In his work, "Separatism and Empire Building in the Twenty-first Century," James (2009), submitted that separatism generally crops up when, at least, one of two conditions is present—uneven development resulting in inequalities of wealth, income, and power, and/or polarization of ethno-religious differences, which are typically resolved through warfare and extreme violence. The commonality is that regional separatist movements arise from popular discontent

It remains open and questionable whether the reasonable dealing with the past is possible without engaging at the state and political levels to consolidating a politics of remembrance that overcomes ethnocentric and exclusionist narrative and memorialization. That remains a precondition for building truth and finding common ground in order to transform their relationships and to achieving reconciliation among former conflicting groups. As Herbert Kelman (2005), an eminent scholar in peace research and conflict resolution, explains, reconciliation consists in improving the ways former adversaries, think, feel about, and act toward one another. This means that reconciliation reflects identity changes within and among contested or conflicting groups.

Events of the Nigerian Civil War

The memory of the civil war is both significant and symbolic strong among the Igbos – just as the memory of the Igbo-led January 15, 1966 coup which killed several leaders of the North – is also very strong in the North. It is possible that Igbos' bitter memory of the war and their attempt at aggressively contesting the narratives about the war created residual anger among those who fought on the federal side or animates among many in the North, the bitter memories of their lost leaders during the January 15, 1966 coup. The anger and suspicion around the agitations for Biafra maybe subtle but they helped in feeding into Igbos' feeling of being unwanted, which ultimately escalates separatist agitation.

The current agitation for Biafra has its roots in the failed Republic of Biafra (a secessionist state in the former Eastern Nigeria, which existed from 30 May 1967 to January 1970). The former Eastern region was dominated by Igbos who led the secessionist movement or insurrection. The reason for which the civil war occurred, according to Adibe (2016), would be a function of where one stands in the divide: he stressed further that, for those analysts

on the federal side, the civil war was caused by the attempt of the mainly Igbo-dominated Eastern Nigeria to secede. In fact, the mantra during the civil war on the federal side was “to keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done”. On the other hand, for those on the side of the short-lived Republic of Biafra, the civil war was caused by the pogrom in the North following the counter coup of July 1966. For such people, the civil war was a war of self-preservation.

While it is normal that people on opposite sides of a conflict will have different narratives of the same event, Diamond (1988) posited that many factors contributed to the civil war. He attributed some of the factors to the 1962/63 census controversy; the Western Regional election crisis of 1965; and the federal election controversy of 1964. These crises created the condition for the unwarranted bloody coup of 1966, which was initially well received (Ejiogu, 2011). In a 2017 report credited to the Daily Trust Newspaper, it was argued that the 1966 coup which was initially applauded turned out to create more problems than it was supposed to solve. It turned out that most of the coup plotters were Igbos and most of those killed were non-Igbos while the Igbo political leaders somehow survived (Daily Trust, 2017). The

anger triggered in the North by this single action of the coup plotters led to the counter coup of July 1966 in which the Igbo Head of State Aguiyi Ironsi and several Igbo army officers were killed. It also led to a pogrom against the Igbos residing in the North, in which an estimated 30,000 Igbos and others of Eastern Nigerian origin were massacred (Kalu-Kalu, 2008). The pogrom in the North against the Igbo after the July 1966 revenge coup, and the failure of Col. Emeka Ojukwu, who was military Governor of Eastern Nigeria to accord recognition to Col. Yakubu Gowon, a Christian from the Middle Belt, as the new Head of State, generated series of events that culminated in Ojukwu's declaration of the Republic of Biafra and the subsequent 30-month civil war. In the two-and-a-half years of the war, Information Nigeria (2017) reported that there was an estimated 100,000 military casualties, while between 500,000 and two million Biafran civilians died from hunger. When the Biafran forces surrendered, the federal government under General Gowon declared that there was "No Victor, No Vanquished" and began the process of trying to reintegrate the Igbos back into the Nigerian society.

Post Civil War Politics and Galvanization of Separatist Ideology in South East Nigeria

As captured by Awofeso (2017), the events after the Nigerian civil war in 1970 have not really been in the favour of the Igbos in Nigeria. According to him, Igbos continue to suffer cases of deprivation and discrimination from successive governments in Nigeria. The Igbos had complained that the 3R (Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, Reintegration) post civil war policies of the federal government to rebuild Igbo land after the civil war were not fulfilled; that Igbos were being treated like second class citizens in their own country; that Igbos were systematically deprived of holding sensitive political offices while the Eastern region has only five states compared to other geo-political zones that have six and seven states respectively, and the refusal of the federal government to address these grievances and other emerging challenges faced by the Igbos contributed, in large measure, to the resurgence of Biafra agitations and the emergence of secessionist groups. Joe Nworgu (Vanguard August 21, 2016) addressed the situation of the Igbos in the Nigerian state :

Since 1966, this has been the story. The story of injustice, marginalization and brazen emasculation of a people. The young people of today have seen it all. They have seen policies of government made just to favour a section of the country, they have seen lopsided appointments into government offices with absolutely no regard to federal character. The agitations you see today are the responses of the young people to the many unjust realities they are being forced to live with (Vanguard August 21,2016).

Similarly, Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB in an interview, reported:

I'm not allowed to contest for the presidency of Nigeria because I'm Igbo. I'm not allowed to aspire to become the Inspector General of Police because I'm Igbo. I'm not allowed to become Chief of Army Staff because I'm Igbo... Why would any idiot want me to be in that sort of country? (www.aljazeera.com)

The perceived injustices of the Igbos in the Nigerian state led to the galvanization of different groups or movements in the South East of Nigeria seeking for a redress of their situation or autonomy from the Nigerian state.

Just as all groups who fought and lost a war, the memory of Biafra evokes something in the mind of an average Igbo, making it possible for it to be tapped as a shared victimhood narrative for mobilization (Adibe, n.d). According to Nnamdi(2014)

,the first resurgence of Biafra separatist movement was in 1999, when Ralph Uwazurike organised the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). During its formative years, Uwazurike stressed that MASSOB was a peaceful group and therefore advertised what it called a 25-stage plan to achieving its goal, peacefully. In spite of the fact that the strategy adopted was seen as being aggressive, though peaceful, it led to his arrest on several occasions during the regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo. In 2005, for instance, Uwazurike was arrested and charged with treason but the case never reached the trial stage as the first two years were spent hearing his bail application. He was granted bail in 2007 to enable him attend to the burial of his mother who died while he was in detention (Masterweb News, 2008). As MASSOB members challenged the federal government, the police and many of the State Governors in Igboland also saw them as nuisance. In 2006, for instance, Sahara Reporters (2006) revealed that the then Governor of Anambra state, Mr. Peter Obi ordered a shoot-at-sight order of Biafran activists who were often fingered in disturbances in the commercial city of Onitsha. During the Jonathan Goodluck administration as Nigeria's President, there

was subtle agitation for the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra despite being branded an Igbo man not only because he bore Azikiwe, an Igbo name but because he came from Bayelsa State, a contiguous state in the South East zone. The Nigerian Voice (2011), for instance, reported that in 2011 Jonathan gave a presidential directive that all MASSOB members detained across the country which was estimated to be well above 1,000 at that time should be released immediately, including Uwazuruike their leader.

As with many organizations or movements, MASSOB attracted a “mixed multitude” of people with varied tendencies and conflicting ambitions. Just as Karl Marx said, capitalism has in it the seed of its own destruction, so did MASSOB have within itself the seed of its own division. One of the early factions of MASSOB was the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) which was established in 2013. Series of controversy surround the actual date of its formation because some scholars were of the opinion that it was established in 2013 while others claimed 2014 (Adibe, n.d). The group is led by a United Kingdom-based Nnamdi Kanu. The factionalisation became necessary when it was clear that the Ralph Uwazuruike-led Movement for the

Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) had been compromised by the Nigerian government and politicians after his incarceration (Adibe, n.d).

IPOB revived the “defunct” Radio Biafra as a “platform to educate and sensitise Biafrans whom the leadership of the movement felt had been biased and made dormant by the propaganda fed to them by the Yoruba dominated media in Nigeria (Emeka, 2014). There are claims that the Radio Biafra was established by MASSOB but Nnamdi Kanu’s led Radio Biafra had been operating under the Jonathan Government, it was the Buhari Government that inadvertently “popularized” him and his Radio Biafra when the Nigerian Broadcasting Service started drawing the public’s attention to his controversial broadcasts but could not block the station from broadcasting in the country despite claiming several times it had done so (Daily Trust, 2015). Ironically, the government also unwittingly gave it further boost by detaining him for about two years on several charges including treason and illegally operating Radio Biafra before subsequently proscribing IPOB and designating it a terrorist organisation. He was refused bail despite several court rulings granting him bail (Nicholas, 2017). His prolonged incarceration turned him into

a hero among his followers and strengthened the bond of ethnic solidarity of his Igbo kinsmen.

While in detention, he converted to Judaism and made even more controversial statements, with his supporters organizing protest marches and rallies across several cities in Nigeria, Europe and North America. By the time he was granted bail on April 28, 2017, he had become a folk hero among his supporters who would literally shut down cities he visited in Igboland as people trooped to get a glimpse of him (The Sun, 2017). In addition to MASSOB which renamed itself Biafra Independent Movement or BIM and IPOB, there are other Biafra separatist groups such as the Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), led by Benjamin Onwuka. According to Laccinno (2016), Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM) came to prominence on November 5, 2012, when it declared a new state of independence at an event in which, at least, 100 peaceful protesters were arrested. On March 8 2014, BZM attacked Enugu State Government House in a bid to hoist the Biafran flag there. It struck again on June 7, 2014 when its members attempted to seize the Radio and Television Stations of the Enugu State Broadcasting Service to announce the secession of Biafra (Vanguard, 2014).

Benjamin Onwuka was charged with treason and detained. He was released after nearly three years in detention in February 2017. Perhaps, sensing that Nnamdi Kanu had dominated the Biafra secessionist space while he was in detention, Onwuka audaciously announced the secession of Biafra effective from August 1, 2017. He also announced the formation of an “interim cabinet” for Biafra, with himself as the “interim President” (Adibe, n.d).

The resurgence of these movements and their continuous agitations for Biafra Republic is a pointer to the fact that “Ojukwu’s reasons for pulling out of the Nigerian state in the early days of the Nigerian independence are still very present” (Awofeso, 2017).

Conclusion

This article was motivated by the seeming inability of the successive Nigerian governments to achieve nationhood and properly integrate all its component units. This failure has continued to drive several agitations for self determination or autonomy in Nigeria. To this end, this article has been able to establish that the Nigerian state currently confronts for too long multidimensional grievances which have culminated into agitations for self

determination and calls for the disintegration of the country by separatist groups especially from the South-South and South East geo-political zones of the country.

Specifically, this article stated that the current and sustained upsurge of agitations emanating from the various separatist movements in the South East zone of Nigeria stemmed from prolonged deprivations, marginalization, and dominance of others in their region; and from resources and opportunities distribution in the Nigerian federal state from which the group felt deprivations despite being a dominant player in the federation.

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